

HEPATITIS B (Serum Hepatitis, hep b)

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a disease caused by the hepatitis B virus which infects the liver. Formerly, hepatitis B was called serum hepatitis. In children, the disease may be mild, but adults can have more severe illness that may cause death. Long-term infection can occur and may result in liver disease or cancer.

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B. However, certain groups have a greater chance of becoming infected; these include infants born to infected mothers, IV drug users, sexual partners of infected people, people with many homosexual or bisexual partners, certain populations with high rates of hepatitis B infection, health care and public safety workers, and anyone who has frequent contact with blood. Clients and staff of institutions for the mentally retarded, and housemates of chronically infected people are at higher risk than the general population, but lower risk than those listed above.

How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis B virus is usually spread through sexual activity or contaminated blood. It can also be spread through close household contact and from infected mothers to their infants at birth.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, sometimes skin rashes, joint pains and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes).

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Symptoms develop slowly and may appear as long as 45-180 days (average is 60-90 days) after exposure to an infected person.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

An infected person can spread the virus for several weeks before symptoms appear and as long as the person is ill. Persons who develop lifelong infection ("carriers"), may spread the virus for their entire lives. Long term infection may result in liver disease or cancer.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

A blood test is used to detect infection with the hepatitis B virus.

Can a person get hepatitis B again?

If a person develops hepatitis B antibodies, one infection with the hepatitis B virus protects them from getting it again. However, there are different types of viral hepatitis, and infection with hepatitis B will not protect against other types of hepatitis.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B.

What can be done if a person is exposed to someone infected with hepatitis B?

When indicated, hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) should be given as soon after exposure as possible. Hepatitis B vaccine is also recommended for people at high risk of additional exposure. For infants born to infected mothers, the combination of HBIG and vaccine is effective at preventing infection.

How can the spread of hepatitis B be stopped

Vaccination is highly protective against the hepatitis B virus. Testing all pregnant women for HBsAg is recommended to prevent spread from infected mothers to their infants. Donated blood should be tested for HBsAg, and individuals who test positive should be rejected as donors. Syringes, acupuncture and tattooing needles should never be reused.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B?

A vaccine is available for persons at high risk of being infected with hepatitis B. The vaccine is safe for most people and the most common complaint is soreness at the injection site. People who receive the vaccine as a precautionary measure may continue to donate blood.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor
- Your local health department, listed in your telephone directory
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191

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